



# Burnout on Mars and Venus: exploring gender differences in emotional exhaustion

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to draw on gender role theory and the stressor-strain literature to examine sex differences in emotional exhaustion. The paper also investigates a mediating mechanism (i.e. work-family conflict) and a boundary condition (i.e. ratio between actual and desired work hours, termed overemployment/underemployment) of the sex – emotional exhaustion relationship.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a sample of 3,114 respondents, the paper analyzes the hypothesized moderated mediation model using Edwards and Lambert's framework.

**Findings** – The paper found support for the authors' model, suggesting that overemployed women are more likely to experience work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion than men. However, when individuals work fewer hours than desired, men are more susceptible to emotional exhaustion than women by first experiencing work-family conflict.

**Research limitations/implications** – Although support exists for the relationship between work-family conflict and burnout, stressor/strain models also should include sex and overemployment/underemployment as predictors of emotional exhaustion.

**Practical implications** – These results suggest organizations can reduce employee work-family conflict and subsequent emotional exhaustion by adjusting the ratio of currently worked to desired work hours. Additionally, organizations can minimize emotional exhaustion by implementing work-family balance workplace policies.

**Originality/value** – To address inconsistencies in studies exploring the sex-emotional exhaustion relationship, the paper explores a mediating mechanism and boundary condition underlying the relationship between sex and emotional exhaustion. Exploring this relationship is important for organizations and employees, as both benefit by minimizing emotional exhaustion to avoid the physical and psychological consequences with which it is associated.

**Keywords** Sex, Emotional exhaustion, Burnout, Work-family conflict, Overemployment, Gender

**Paper type** Research paper

As evidenced by the following quote, burnout is a problem that affects employees in a range of professions and industries in personal and profound ways (Maslach *et al.*, 2001):

I was a medical student at Tulane University when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans [...] All of my samples, reagents, and files were lost. In addition, Tulane administration laid off my research sponsor. I can remember a particularly hard period from December of 2005 through early February of 2006 where I experienced emotional exhaustion and overwhelm. It was a mixture of bereavement because I thought my career had been washed away with

